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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 WELLINGTON 000661

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/ANP, EAP/RSP, EAP/EP, INR/EAP
NSC FOR VICTOR CHA AND MICHAEL GREEN
SECDEF FOR OSD/ISA LIZ PHU
PACOM FOR J2/J233/J5/SJFHQ

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: MAORI PARTY PROSPECTS DIMINISH IN SEPTEMBER
ELECTION

REF: A. 04 WELLINGTON 601

[1](#)B. 04 WELLINGTON 909

[1](#)C. WELLINGTON 134

Classified By: Siria Lopez, Auckland Consul General,
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

(U) This cable originated from AmConGen Auckland.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Although the Maori Party has made impressive gains in membership and general support in its one year of existence, despite early projections it is unlikely to capture all seven Maori constituency seats in the September 17 election. It's probable 3-5 constituency seats would still make the Maori Party a potential coalition partner for either major party, although both Labour and National have distanced themselves from the Maori party so far. If it came to it, it is more likely the Maori party would end up in a coalition with Labour, given the current government's relatively pro-Maori policies. Maori are, however, conservative on social issues, and a Maori MP had previously told us that an informal arrangement with National on such issues cannot be ruled out. National's recent promise to eliminate the specially-designated Maori Parliament seats may put the kibosh on this, however. Maori Party leaders insist it would be up to the party's followers to decide on a coalition partner. End Summary.

Background: Maori Party Makes Electoral Registration
Inroads

[1](#)2. (SBU) Maori anger over a perceived Labour Government turnaround on Maori claims to New Zealand's foreshore and seabed led to the creation of the Maori Party in July 2004 (reftel A). Since then the Maori Party has sought to become the Maori voice in New Zealand's parliament. For the September 2005 election, the Party will contest all seven exclusively Maori constituency seats, as well as other general electorate and list seats for a current total of 51 candidates. Dr. Whatarangi Winiata is Maori Party President but the party's most popular and visible figure is co-leader (and former Labour Party member) MP Tariana Turia. Turia will run against her Labour Party nephew for the Te Tai Hauauru seat. Pita Sharples, an educator, is the other party co-leader and is taking on the charismatic but politically wounded Labour MP John Tamihere in Tamaki-Makaurau.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Despite the odds against its survival -- and Tamihere's predictions of its stillborn birth -- the Maori Party has evolved into a real Maori political alternative to Labour. Since its inception, the Party has managed to sign up more than 19,000 new members through "flaxroots" efforts, an impressive achievement. Notwithstanding, voter numbers are more important than total card-carrying party members. Under New Zealand's political system, Maori citizens have the option of signing up for either the general roll or the Maori electoral roll, which votes on the seven Maori constituency seats (seats the National Party has pledged to abolish). Currently, 204,519 persons have enrolled on the Maori roll; 166,822 on the general roll. This is a nearly 9% increase over 2002 figures for both rolls. Of first-time enrollments, mainly younger voters, 55 per cent are opting for the Maori roll. The latter represents the fruits of the Maori Party's strategy to focus registration efforts on first-time, younger voters who lack a history of voting for Labour (reftel B).

[1](#)4. (SBU) But what makes the Maori Party worth watching is its potential as a coalition partner for either a Labour or National-led government. It is widely assumed that Turia will win her electorate seat. The Party is also expected to capture other Maori constituency seats. Each MP gained increases the party's legislative influence. (The Maori

party would also be allocated additional parliamentary seats based on its share of the party vote if they meet the minimum 5%, but they are polling at less than that now.) Since neither Labour nor National are expected to win clear majorities, they will need parliamentary partners to form workable governments. The Maori Party is one such potential partner. Despite the Maori Party's birth as a protest against Labour, it's more likely that it would team up with that party, although as Maori tend to be more conservative on social issues some kind of unofficial deal with National is also possible. (Assuming National's pledge to eliminate the special Maori seats from Parliament does not put the kibosh on the two Party's discussion of this possibility.) Maori Party officials say it will be up to Maori Party voters to decide on a coalition partner after the election.

Policies: Difficult to Assess

15. (C) From the start, the Maori Party has been criticized for its lack of policy pronouncements. This situation is little better in the immediate lead-up to the September polls -- that is if a voter desires articulated party platforms in the conventional, Euro-American sense. In May, the Party did publicize the centerpiece of its policies or "tikanga" but it actually consisted of sweeping, idealistic guiding principles firmly based on Maori socio-cultural values. One searches the "tikanga" document in vain for the Party's position on taxes or health care. For that, one must often rely on the ad hoc emergence of specifics as uttered by party politicians on the campaign trail. For example, we now know that the Maori Party wants to lower the retirement age of Maori to 60, make tertiary education free for everyone and eliminate tax for those earning under \$25,000. It has also slowly filtered out that the Party wants to make Maori language compulsory for all civil servants, affirm Maori authority on the national resource review process and reinstate New Zealand's moratorium on genetically-modified plants.

16. (SBU) In terms of foreign policy, a Maori Party representative, Charles Joe, spoke to a University of Auckland audience mostly in the idealistic generalities of the "tikanga" document. Perhaps because the audience was non-Maori and the other party politicians present offered specifics, Joe also confirmed that the party wanted NZ's nuclear-free stance maintained, supported NZ's international peacekeeping role and had a "no first-strike policy." The Party also placed priority on the UN draft on indigenous people and wanted an international treaty for indigenous nations. As Turia has said in the past, Joe added that his party would oppose any international treaties or agreements that breached the principles enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi. That is to say its' foreign and trade policies would be driven by adherence to Maori values. (Note: The Maori Party has been accused of refusing to criticize Robert Mugabe's regime simply because he is a black African leader. The Party also opposed a recent bill to strengthen NZ's anti-terrorism finance laws. Still, it did support the rightist Federated Farmers in the farmers' land access battle with Labour. End Note)

Election Prospects

17. (C) The Maori Party has been challenged from its inception by the poverty of its core constituency. Financially disadvantaged, the party has focused instead on harnessing "people power" by drafting volunteers to go door-to-door to drum up support. Labour's John Tamihere told Auckland Consul General that the Maori Party's real strength lies in the seductive, emotional appeal of its message of grievance to relatively well-off, middle-class Maori. As a result, it enjoys strong support from influential Maori institutions such as Maori radio stations, TV, university, language schools and health and welfare organizations. This Maori infrastructure provides the Party with its transport and information resource needs and thus makes up for any ostensible lack of cash. Another Maori political observer agreed that Maori institutions, although funded under Labour governments, are "hotbeds" of Maori Party support. She and Tamihere both observed that a large Maori turnout in September will hurt Labour.

18. (SBU) Before the election date was announced, many observers were predicting that the Maori Party would obtain at least five constituency seats. In several polls, Maori party candidates such as Pita Sharples and Hone Harawira (for Te Tai Tokerau) were pulling way ahead of their Labour rivals. Since then, however, some leads have narrowed; Sharples is now running neck-to-neck with Tamihere (who probably now prefers Labour Party money over Maori institutional support). Harawira's lead over Labour's Dover Samuels has almost halved. The Maori Party (and Labour) is losing some votes with the entry of independent candidates and those of Destiny New Zealand, a party allied

with a conservative Maori Christian church. (Destiny also appeals to socially conservative Pacific Islanders, also being courted by the Maori Party, who were upset by Labour's prostitution and civil union bills.)

9. (SBU) Perhaps more influential than election rivals, however, is the Labour tactic of scaring Maori by claiming a vote for the Maori Party is a vote for National. This message is being drummed into Maori and other left-leaning voters. The Labour tactic is particularly effective on those Maori concerned about National's threat to reduce welfare benefits. Some Maori voters may try to reconcile their divided loyalties by voting for the Maori Party for constituency seats and ticking Labour for the party/ "list" vote.

10. (SBU) Although it is also contesting 35 general electorate seats in an effort to appeal to non-Maori, the Party is not expected to win many, if any, of these seats. The small size of the Maori electorate vote in general means it will not obtain many list seats. A more realistic scenario is that the Maori Party will win 3-5 Maori constituency seats--but not 7. This result would still make the Party a potential coalition partner for Labour or National, notwithstanding the major parties' avowed distaste for such an arrangement. In an August TV debate with National's Don Brash, when asked about possible Labour-Maori Party talks, PM Clark swatted the party off by replying it was the "last cab in the rank." Brash more tactfully said that he couldn't see cooperation happening. Earlier, at a July Diplomatic Club lunch in Wellington, Turia noted that the Maori Party had not offered itself as a coalition partner, nor would it. But, she added, if approached by one or more parties, it would put the issue of which party to vote for and under what terms (e.g. confidence and supply or a full coalition) to its voters.

Long-Term Goals: More Maori Constituency Seats and More List Seats

11. (C) Echoing Turia, co-leader Pita Sharples told Consul General that the Maori Party was not going "hell for bent" to be in the Government right now. The question of coalitions does not loom large for the party. For the September election, it was trying to get the Maori voice heard in Parliament and to stand staunch on the Treaty of Waitangi. If it succeeded in getting seven MPs in, this would have the desired impact and momentum. Then, the following year, the Party would undertake a national campaign to move every Maori from the general to the Maori rolls in order to increase the number of Maori constituency seats. Thus, in a subsequent election, the Party could enjoy, for example, fourteen seats in addition to general electorate and list seats. It was with this long-term goal in mind that the Party had decided to contest the general electorates, go for the list vote and choose several non-Maori election candidates of European and Pacific Island descent. There is, Sharples declared, not much of a long-term future for the Maori Party "if we are not inclusive and if we have just Maori sitting there-we must go for all of New Zealand."
Burnett